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ABSTRACT

The middle school provides a planned transition from childhood to young adulthood: it moves a student from the protective nurture of elementary school to the more depersonalized high school setting gradually, sensitively, and by design. Composed of the ideas from middle school education that each of the educators who choose this wonderful level of educational concentration seem to discover over and over again, this handbook is divided into six sections. The first and second sections introduce the middle schooler and cover the history and focus of middle schools. Section 3 discusses such topics associated with the middle school curriculum as sexuality and physical education, evaluation and grading, and scheduling. Sections 4 and 5 are dedicated to middle school educators--teachers and the principal--and the middle schooler's parents. The sixth section highlights important middle school issues including advisors, behavior, leadership and participation, mixed-age groups, multicultural education, networking, and transition. Intended to become a workbook for each of its readers, this document has wide margins to make room for personal stories and anecdotes. Topics covered in the appendices include learning and learners, boldness, middle school teachers, parent peer groups, middle and upper school cooperation, and the resources used for this document. (KM)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL HANDBOOK

Harry Finks

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MIDDLE SCHOOL HANDBOOK

Harry Finks

National Association of Independent Schools
75 Federal Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02110

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INTRODUCTION

A student teacher sat in my office wanting some parting words of wisdom from the principal before she finished her assignment in our middle school. The conversation was interrupted by an eighth grade boy who walked through the closed door and excused himself.

"You were right. Melissa was feeling very bad about what happened at the dance."

"I thought so."

"I think you may want to have Eddie come in to talk. Things are really rotten for him at home right now."

"Okay, I'll do that."

"You know that Spanish test I was studying so hard for? I got an A on it."

"Good for you. You got a pretty poor score last time—wasn't it a 60-something? I know you feel good about that improvement."

"I sure do. Have to get back to class. 'Bye. Excuse me."

The student teacher, with wide eyes and an expression of being highly impressed, said, "Wow! You really know the kids! You know all about them. How does anyone ever reach that point? How could you know them so well? How could I ever know them like you do?"

"Well, I know that one real well. He's my son."

The student teacher was seeking hints and expertise in middle school education that seem to be discovered over and over again by each of us who chooses this wonderful level of educational concentration. This handbook, filled with such discoveries and providing other educators some shortcuts, has grown out of workshops for middle school leaders. Middle school people don't take themselves so seriously that any of them believe that they have "expertise"; they have "experience." This handbook was conceived as a way to share that experience.

There is no one format for a middle school handbook. Having wide margins makes room for personal stories and anecdotes to be added. Borrowing and sharing are legal in education, and whenever middle school educators get together it is apparent that, most often by instinct, they discover countless ways that work. Here are some of their discoveries.

We want this handbook to become a personal collection and personalized workbook for each of its readers, one that welcomes the stories and names that have made middle school education excitingly pure and satisfying for more and more educators who choose to be right in the middle of things.

Harry Finks
Fall 1989

1.
THE MIDDLE SCHOOLER

"When I want to be a child and play like a child, somebody tells me to grow up and act like an adult, and when I want to act like an adult and be an adult, somebody else tells me to act my age."
—Middle schooler, from Manvel Schauffler, The Bush School, Seattle

You know them.

We all do.

They are the ones we hear in a much too near booth in the fast food restaurant, talking, laughing, eating so loudly that they complicate our digestion. They are the ones who cause us to hurry to new seats in a movie theater just as the theater goes dark. They are the ones we brake for as they skateboard past us down a steep hill and through a busy traffic intersection. They are middle schoolers.

Just who are these middle schoolers?

They are the ones playing comfortably with toy cars at one moment and dreaming of real ones at the next; the ones with the control of the family phone or the ones painfully longing for someone to call; the ones you can tell to "grow up and act your age" and "slow down and look your age" during the same day.

Middle schoolers are complex. Next to old people, early adolescents may suffer more age-based prejudice than any other group in society. Throughout the middle school years the young person frequently wonders or asks, "Am I normal?"

This is a natural question because of the wide range of developmental tasks in the life of a young person evolving from age ten to fourteen. In *The Control of the Onset of Puberty* (Wiley, 1974), John Money, an expert on early adolescence, says, "It is very difficult for some youngsters to be caught in

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the no-man's land between their chronological age and their physique age, trying to keep their social age, their academic age, their personality age, and their psychosexual age in conformity with their chronological age. Stress and conflict may be reflected in a variety of ways." Everything becomes uneven, intense, and paradoxical.

Individuals grow on individual timetables. Growth varies from month to month, and it is not even the same for each aspect of development. Rapid change and inconsistent growth patterns provide a middle school with the most diverse student body of any school division. A teacher faces a "different" group of students every time the class meets.

The acceleration and unevenness of physical and psychological changes during preadolescence and early adolescence have emotional side effects. This is the time during a person's life when the most changes occur. These changes bring anxiety and depression as the individual loses the known and enters the unknown, quits being little and cute, and suddenly looks adult and can act like an adult but cannot control the timetable of development.

What is happening?

The young adolescent is worrying, watching, striving, needing, bouncing back and forth—

> *Worrying about small and large things—grades, whether people are angry, war, next year, friends, popularity, being fat, parents' reactions to math scores, taking a shower after gym class, French, school pizza, who will sit together at lunch, world hunger, hair, shoes, starvation, and justice*
>
> *Watching the first appearance of body hair, the seventh grade basketball team with classmates standing as tall as 6'2" or under 5'0", the schoolwork and class participation of every other classmate, who receives the most phone calls and valentines, and which brand of shoe is the right one to wear*
>
> *Striving for a personal identity while allowing peer pressures to mold that image, for a positive self-concept (especially crucial between the ages of ten and fourteen), to be "me," whoever that is*
>
> *Needing to talk, to argue, to be listened to and not indulged, to work on feelings, to have privacy, to be in a group, to develop confidence but also to be seen as vulnerable, to question discipline, to doubt parents and school opinions while trying out personal ones, to succumb to fads, to make family meals difficult, to need rest but be unwilling to go to bed, to eat six meals a day or nothing at all*
>
> *Bouncing back and forth between exuberant energy and mournful lassitude, self-confidence and self-consciousness, boldness and withdrawal*

With so many things on young people's minds, it is no wonder that they sometimes become forgetful. Outside influences do continue to shape values and behaviors, but there is less control over these outside forces. Peers temporarily replace parents as the greatest influence, because for young people "being different" becomes the most difficult thing to be.

> *The cleaning out of lockers at the end of a school year can reveal a great deal about what is important to young people. Among the mounds of school papers one might easily find a "petition" on who does or does not like a particular student, with categories marked "yes," "no," and "sorta"; a poem pleading for equality and a chance for the world's needy; a cruel drawing of an isolated and unpopular boy titled "My Face Is Fat"; a long written plan of ways to maintain a friendship through the months of summer; and a copy of* Love and Sex in Plain Language, *a sex education text by Eric W. Johnson, with the pictures of different levels of physical development labeled with classmates' names.*

These are just some of the concerns of middle school students during this important and exhilarating period in their lives. They have reached a stage where they can grasp complicated ideas. They can classify, generalize, think beyond facts, and defend opinions. As students, they certainly are capable of completing more difficult academic work, yet academic interests have to compete for attention with many other important personal interests and worries.

Joan S. Lipsitz, former director of the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, lists important developmental characteristics and needs that should be kept in mind during these years.

Young adolescents

- are *as a group* widely diverse
- are engaged in self-exploration and self-definition
- are ready and eager to participate in their home, school, and community
- need and want positive relationships with both peers and adults
- continue to need structure and clear limits
- need and desire increased levels of autonomy
- have a high energy level
- need opportunities to achieve competence and success

Middle schools exist to meet these needs.

Notes

2.
THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

"I am concerned that early adolescence, a crucial time in human development, is the most overlooked school-age population in America."
— Joan S. Lipsitz

Paul S. George, chair of the middle school program at the University of Florida, describes the middle school as "one of the few humanistic innovations since the progressive education movement" and one of the few educational innovations to be championed by educators themselves. Until recently, most parents of middle school students had never attended a middle school, and so they questioned this concept and philosophy of education. The junior high school, which most parents experienced, has come to be called "the Edsel of American education."

Before 1920, four out of every five high school graduates attended a school program of two levels: eight years of elementary school and four of secondary school. During the next decades the idea of a unique and transitional school experience took root at different times, in different places, and with different names, but it was usually called junior high school. By 1960, four out of five students had followed a pattern of six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school.

Faults in the junior high school design became evident by the middle of the century. Educational misjudgments were apparent as educators learned more about the middle-level learner. The junior high school had been meant to serve as a buffer between elementary and high school, where preadolescents would be protected from the corrupt influence of high schoolers and where they could not, in turn, corrupt innocent grade schoolers.

Junior high schools became "isolation wards" where young learners were exposed to the worst institutional excesses of high school life, such as marching bands, cheerleader tryouts, varsity sports, partying, and passive learning experiences. Often these schools were staffed by disgruntled high school teachers who patiently paid their dues until a "real" teaching position opened up in the high school.

Junior high schools generally consisted of grades 7-9. Students were treated much like high schoolers, and the school environment was subject-oriented. Like the middle school, junior high school was meant to deal with early adolescents, but, unlike the middle school, its program did not consider the learner.

The middle school is intended to be more than preparation for high school. Instead of asking students to leap into a less personalized setting following elementary school, the middle school provides a planned transition from childhood to young adulthood. It moves a student from the protective nurture of elementary school to the more depersonalized high school setting gradually, thoughtfully, sensitively, and by design.

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The rise of the middle school

The middle school movement is a young one. Paul George labels the years 1960-1980 "Phase One." During this initial period, middle schools grew from 500 in 1976 to about 5,000 in 1980. The momentum has not slowed. That early adolescence is a critical point in life is now popularly accepted by educators, parents, and politicians. Despite the early pronouncement of skeptics and critics, "the school in the middle" is here to stay.

Because educators and the public generally accept the desirability of a separate middle level of schooling, the need for specialized preparation of teachers has been recognized in the university community. At the same time high schools, even those with no educational empathy for middle schools, help assure the survival of the concept because they prefer to encompass four years instead of three.

The first phase of middle school history saw the definition of general program guidelines. Among a long list of these guidelines were

- The need for teaming among teachers
- Guidance roles for the classroom teacher
- Enrichment of the curriculum
- Instructional strategies and materials appropriate for the age group
- Continuous-progress programs
- Physical education

Because the middle school concept came about in reaction to the rigidity that had destroyed the junior high school program, emphasis was placed on flexible responsiveness to local conditions and early adolescent needs.

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Middle school educators learned during Phase One that teachers having special attitudes and skills were needed to lead the particular programs. They also learned that teachers needed in-service support so that they could meet with others of similar commitment and excitement. Universities and state departments of education awakened to this new reality. Research began, and this new concept was implemented and enriched.

As a product of the 1960's, early middle schools tried too hard not to give too many rules and to not be too directive. Fuzzy philosophies, removal of classroom walls, and confusion and laxity in implementing programs proved scary, even to liberal parents. At best, the middle school philosophy was vague.

Time has changed the way the middle school speaks of itself and the way it regards students. Middle schools are now in Phase Two, which could be called a time of defending important gains. Even though Paul George suggests that Phase Two will go from 1980 to 2000, exemplary middle schools already exist. Moving beyond reliance on instinct, these exemplary middle schools have identified what works and what does not work in meeting the needs of early adolescents with highly successful, long-lasting programs. The result is a formula for good practice that must be refined, tested, and validated during Phase Two. Some common strengths and similarities in this formula are

- Interdisciplinary organization of teachers (not necessarily team teaching)
- Block scheduling with increased flexibility
- Enriched curriculum, including exploratory activities
- Multi-age groupings as an alternative to chronological, age-graded organization
- Intramural and modified interscholastic programs to replace high school–level athletics
- Specially trained teachers

During this phase the credibility gap has begun to close between the public and the professionals. The media now speak of "middle schools" and no longer about "junior high schools." More and more parents, themselves the product of middle schools, are familiar with the concept and the practices. Teachers and administrators are strengthening their commitment to such programs, and university professors in education departments are learning what needs to be taught by seeing successful programs work.

Paul George sees Phase Three (2001+) as following the introduction of the concept in Phase One and the consensus attained in Phase Two. He foresees

a deeper significance for the middle school program as it becomes the model for education as a whole. A society troubled by individualism run rampant needs a school system that encourages cooperation and interdependence. A society characterized by loneliness, disengagement, and withdrawal demands a school system that encourages long-range interpersonal commitments and a sense of community. A society afflicted with "hurry sickness" and haunted by destructive competitiveness depends on schools that ensure fulfillment and success without pushing their members beyond their capacity to enjoy the rewards of effort.

George suggests that, while the middle school movement may not be America's last chance to influence the lives of young people, it may be the best. What makes such good sense for the middle school makes equally good sense for education as a whole. Middle school educators therefore have an extraordinary opportunity.

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What should the middle school try to do?

The movement from the junior high school approach to a middle school program was a shift from subject-oriented schoolwork to child-centered schools that signified recognition of a distinct and real period of life having its own strengths and needs. Although it is the job of middle schools to provide a planned transition from the protective, guided environment of the elementary school to the departmentalized high school, they must first provide a program that is appropriate to the immediate academic goals of their students.

The National Association of Independent Schools, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Center for Early Adolescence, and the National Middle School Association have each made a list of what middle schools should emphasize, provide, and do as they serve young people of ages ten to fourteen. All four organizations state that the curriculum must reach out and be responsive to the developmental pattern of students.

Successful schools for this age group are always described as positive environments that afford, in the words of David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* (Addison-Wesley, 1981), "as much consideration for who the student is and becomes—his and her self-concept, self-responsibility, attitudes toward school and personal happiness—as for how much and what he or she knows!"

Borrowing from these lists and from several articles, here are some of of the qualities and activities to be found in a successful middle school.

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- An environment where the child, not the program, is most important and where the opportunity to succeed is ensured for all students
- A home base with a feeling of safety and security for students created by caring adults
- Social experiences that help students learn to understand and control their emotions while working in a group
- A program designed uniquely for and adapted to the needs of early adolescents that includes the widest possible range of intellectual, social, and physical experiences
- Opportunities for exploring and developing skills needed by all while making allowances for individual learning patterns and interests
- Emphasis on guidance and human relations and attention to the development of mental processes and attitudes needed for constructive citizenship, lifelong competence, and effective leisure
- A structured advisory program and the assurance of a caring adult assigned to each student
- Staff members who respect and understand the age group and possess tolerance, flexibility, alertness, regard, energy, and a sense of humor
- A climate that enables students to develop abilities, learn to love learning, find facts, weigh evidence, draw conclusions, determine values, and open their minds to new information
- An out-of-the-building educational program that allows students to experience their environment
- A program that offers variety in the creative arts, music, languages, and leisure activities
- Frequent opportunities for releasing energy
- Personalized, continuous, and specific evaluation of student work and regular student-adult sessions for support and feedback
- A curriculum and teaching methods that reflect a multicultural and gender-sensitive approach
- Varied groupings based not only on cognitive but also on physical, social, and emotional criteria
- A thoughtful, gradual transition from a self-contained lower school learning environment to a departmentalized upper school approach

- An academic and athletic program that does not emphasize the traditions of competition to the exclusion of important lessons in cooperation and personal growth
- A curriculum that teaches how to study, how to do research, how to explore, how to think, and how to learn

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People often ask what grades belong in a middle school. There is no one answer to this question. Among research scholars and middle school educators, support seems most generally found for schools consisting of grades 6-8. In reality, however, many schools decide for themselves what constitutes their middle school grouping. Some have fifth graders in their middle school because there is classroom space in their middle school building and none in the lower school; other middle schools, pinched for space, include only grades 7 and 8.

Perhaps because people remain confused by young adolescents they also remain full of questions about what is going on in any given middle school. Despite a consensus that the middle school's mission is an honorable and essential one, middle schools are not identical; in philosophy and form they reflect local needs and realities. What must remain constant is the focus on the student. Alert middle school people always ask themselves

- Are we doing as well as we might?
- What are our most difficult problems with children? Do we cause these problems, or do the children cause them?
- Are we thinking about students' needs or our own comfort?
- Who doesn't understand what we are doing? How can we help them to understand?

Academic competence is as much a prime goal in middle school education as it is at any other level. The question is not to force a choice between a rigorous academic program or a developmental, exploratory experience; the question is, rather, how to balance the two. Academic competence and personal development are linked, according to Roger Tietz, a middle school principal in Wisconsin ("What It's Like in the Middle," *Principal*, Jan. 1981).

> Until a person is secure, allowed to be a child for his term, allowed to make the necessary mistakes in learning and behavior without excessive sufferings . . . competence is delayed. The middle school cannot serve as a screen that sifts out the failures from the successes. Success in the arts, sports and creative endeavors, as well as academic success, must be fostered. Academic competence is a given for middle schools, but seeing curriculum in broader terms, realizing the inherent power in guidance and caring, will complement the child's confidence as a learner.

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And it is the "whole child," to use John Dewey's term, who benefits by focus on this particularly appropriate kind of rigor.

What works

For a study sponsored by the National Commission on Excellence in Education and published in the fall 1985 issue of *The Principals' Center Newsletter* of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, James P. Garvin, director of middle school education at Gordon College, visited twenty-two "effective middle schools" in New England. He identified six common denominators among them.

- Each school had a clearly defined and articulated mission statement based on an understanding of early adolescent developmental characteristics that had been developed by representatives of all groups comprising the school community—parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff.
- Each school had effective leadership.
- Teachers in these schools could be called student-centered—committed to the "total life of the student" rather than to curriculum specialization.
- Parents were strongly involved and felt welcome in their children's schools.
- The schools had ongoing goal development and evaluation programs involving everyone in the school community.
- The positive quality of life evident in these schools was perhaps the most important single variable responsible for the quality of life in the school.

A national survey of middle school effectiveness conducted by Paul S. George and Lynn L. Oldaker and reported in *Evidence for the Middle School* (National Middle School Association, 1985) showed that changing to the middle school form of organization positively affects student achievement and personal development, learning climate, faculty morale, staff development, and parent and community involvement. The survey revealed success in the following eight areas.

- Student achievement rose. Test scores and teachers' judgments showed specific results in these schools, with both higher expectations of students and greater productivity by students.

- Discipline problems decreased.
- Students' personal development was positively affected. More than 80 percent of the respondents testified that students' emotional health, creativity, and confidence in self-directed learning were all positively affected by reorganization.
- The climate for learning became more positive. Adviser-advisee programs and an increase in school guidance improved communication and empathy.
- Faculty morale improved. More than 90 percent of the respondents described staff morale and rapport as either moderately or strongly positive following the school's reorganization.
- Staff development was encouraged through ample and successful opportunities for development and growth.
- Parent involvement and support increased.
- Community involvement and coverage were favorable.
- Reorganization appeared to delay certain social pressures that seem to precipitate an undesirable sophistication in young people.

What has been outlined here is a middle school concept—a philosophy and an approach—to clarify just what a middle school is and what it is not. Clearly this is not the old junior high school, with its junior-sized letter sweaters and the rush toward "going steady."

Middle school is not an elementary school, either, though it does share with lower school commitment to nurturing the whole child. Middle school students have matured enough to be active participants in helping to determine program and direction. Developmentally, they can no longer accept parent-like control and love at school.

And middle school is not upper school. Trial and error and risk taking are still seen to have educational advantage for middle school students, and concerns about college acceptance are still distant. In terms of purity and purpose, the middle school has relatively few binding restrictions and outside determiners, at least when compared to a high school. This relative freedom is both a challenge and an opportunity.

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3.
THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Dear Mr. Finks,
Thank you for the letter concerning my fathers death. I'm looking forward to ~~scholl~~ school, were we can meet on a less sorrowful basis.
Truely yours,
Michael

P.S. spelling isn't evrything.

A useful activity for middle school leaders is to play "The Middle School Game." Middle school principals who daily play the real-life version of overseeing and developing curriculum have new power when this work translates to a board game. In the game they are asked to determine the program for "the right middle school." They are given a clean slate—an empty game board. They are freed from their own school's history of "We've tried that here already and it didn't work," and they are freed from the personalities who protect private turf with "I've always taught the Civil War in February."

Along with an empty game board, the players receive scissors, tape, and a bagful of pieces of paper representing components that indeed do belong to the "right middle school" curriculum. Of course, the pieces, when combined, take up more space than the board allows. The hour that follows is thought of as a school year. By the end of that time, the pieces are to be cut and taped to fit within the space available on the game board. No one is allowed to expand by going beyond the edges of the board.

This exercise highlights the most basic curriculum problem of the middle school: too much to do in too little time. Every piece of the game is legitimately important. Middle school philosophy and the developmental needs of young adolescents can be used to support them all. Still, they won't fit on that clean slate, which represents the "right middle school"; despite the best intentions and the support of philosophy, there are limits. Issues of

"too much" are frustrating, and compensatory adjustments quite often lead schools to institute less effective programs.

The game demonstrates some important lessons in middle school curriculum development. When something is added to the program, something else must be removed, cut back, or creatively combined. There are countless pressures to do more, and much of what is encouraged is appropriate and sensible. In trying to solve the problem, people have a tendency to cut things into ever smaller pieces, overlap other pieces, and pile them up; the squeeze is painful. Each new item coming into the program affects the entire program.

In actual practice, a new idea has to struggle for its right to be part of the program against unfair odds. The new idea has the disadvantage of being compared to what is already in place instead of being considered as something that is truly needed and wanted for students. Schools tend either to jam in something new, diluting all parts of the current curriculum, or to refuse to consider anything that is new.

Imagination is called for. Essential and difficult decisions must be made.

If one believes that the middle school serves a unique population having special developmental characteristics, it is apparent that the scope and sequence of the curriculum need to follow a developmental pattern. The direction and pace of the curriculum must follow the direction and pace of the intellectual growth of the child and allow for social, physical, and emotional growth.

Joan Lipsitz's list of developmental characteristics at the end of the first chapter can be used as a guide to framing institutional responses. A useful exercise for any middle school faculty is to list its own institutional responses to each of these characteristics. How does the school respond, for example, to the diversity among young adolescents? How does it provide real opportunities for participation? How does it respond to the high energy level of early adolescents? Many middle schools already follow their instincts and their students' behaviors wisely. This exercise may help a school to understand why certain decisions were made in the past and why certain practices have become traditions.

The following suggestions can help the curriculum better meet the needs of middle-level learners and allow the school to offer an appropriate curriculum with reduced outside complaint, anger, interference, or confusion.

- The middle school must prepare a clear written statement of curriculum in the most basic academic terms.

The statement must be articulate, traditional in appearance, sequential, and honest. Middle school zealots tend to sell the developmental aspects of their program first because they are the most important consideration. But to do this may be politically unwise. Even though the curriculum is firmly

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based on academic quality, the school's varied constituents may not know it. Nonacademic explanations of curriculum alarm skeptics and can cause unnecessary problems. The "traditional academic program" should be prefaced by a clear description of the middle school philosophy and the middle school learner. The all-important developmental arguments fit well in this format. The nonacademic aspects of the middle school curriculum should also be described clearly and in the same format as the academic parts.

- The middle school curriculum must teach students skills, provide them with blueprints, invite thinking, and not "lose" young learners.

The curriculum should give students the skills to do research and deal with new material, practical ways to organize homework, and the desire for more learning. In the middle school program, these things are more important than subject matter.

- Some of the curriculum should be presented in cafeteria fashion, with a good variety of offerings served on small plates.

Students should be encouraged to take as many "entrees" as they can handle. Sampling and enjoying many offerings are fine goals. Students should like what they sample well enough to want to come back for more later. Things at this stage do not always need to be "mastered" or "finished."

- Although few schools succeed in establishing a curriculum that runs well through the separate divisions, they need to keep working at it.

Divisions have become better at criticizing one another than they have at recognizing and using the strengths of each to facilitate learning. Often the greatest communication breakdown occurs between the middle and upper schools. The upper school says, "This is where we start," and blames the middle school for not getting there. The middle school says, "This is as far as we go," and blames the upper school for starting in the wrong place. With an open mind, the middle school can present an articulate program to the upper school and take the lead in negotiating. The gap can be closed by communication, and the middle school can encourage and model real cooperation.

- Take advantage of the fact that most independent middle schools have considerable freedom in selecting the materials used in classes, but be sure that the materials are developmentally appropriate.

Because many of our schools have bright, talented students and parents who feel that their tuition money should buy a certain amount of "prestige," there is a tendency to use materials that are intended for older students. Some middle schools pride themselves on having their seventh graders read a college text in anthropology or having eighth graders use introductory textbooks designed for college Latin. But this tempting pressure must not overshadow age appropriateness.

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While bright students need appropriate responses to their brightness, that response usually should not be acceleration. Pressure from parents, from the upper school, and from teachers who like to accelerate their programs can lead to materials that "miss the kids." The school must resist pressure to hurry, despite the public's belief that speeding up is the answer for bright children. This is a never-ending battle for the middle school.

- One of the luxuries of the middle school, and the ingredient that allows a degree of purity in the program, is the relative unimportance of the transcript, at least as compared to the high school transcript. (Schools that end at eighth or ninth grade can face limits similar to those that constrain high schools, however.)

This freedom, however great or small, permits the middle school safely to ask questions about the appropriateness of what is being done. Can the writing program, for example, have students master paragraph writing when parents and students are pushing for long, quantitative essays? What about algebra and its place in eighth grade? In seventh or sixth grade? Should students have to choose between art and drama and music, or is this the time when all three should be required?

- Traditional departmental ways of designing curriculum are—at the least—debatable at the middle school level.

Departmentalization takes logical wholes and splits them into parts. More sophisticated students begin to discover when they are older that these separate lessons and subjects do at times link up. For the middle school, using larger blocks of interdisciplinary instruction is more than common sense; it is a natural, sensible, and logical way to structure the curriculum. Never lose sight of the premise that a true middle school is student-centered, not subject-centered.

- A program that creates opportunities for group interaction is crucial.

Middle school students are experiencing a highly personal stage of development, and so the curriculum for them must be carefully attuned to the exploratory nature of this period. Wise educators capitalize on the quest for self-discovery and group identity to make these years perfect ones for group activities and group projects. Simulations, games, and lessons centered around exchanging thoughts and much talking among students are natural uses of energy. Much of what belongs in the middle school curriculum is group-focused and designed for or by the group involved.

Notes

Interdisciplinary instruction

Middle school advocates know that some form of interdisciplinary instruction makes sense at this level, but doing it well is not easy. Some faculties have trouble choosing themes suitable for interdisciplinary teaching. Some efforts to be interdisciplinary seem contrived and forced. Other faculties have members who think in terms of the whole and how parts fit together naturally. Interdisciplinary thinking is easy for them.

In the Howard County, Maryland, public schools, a group of teachers working to discover the natural basis for interdisciplinary instruction determined that it was "thinking." They identified thinking skills needed for separate subjects, considered how thinking skills learned in one class might be generally transferable and useful in other classes, and designed a program.

The school should gather its best interdisciplinary thinkers and give them the time, training, and support they need to design a program.

Sexuality education

The middle school must provide students with developmentally appropriate sexuality education.

What Deborah Roffman, sexuality educator in Baltimore, has to say about her program is a wise foundation for thinking about what belongs in a middle school sexuality education program (*Independent School*, Oct. 1981).

> Too often curriculums in this field read like cookbooks . . . partially to head off anticipated objections with lofty but neatly and precisely listed objectives. In contrast, the best programs are often those devised almost on a day-to-day basis as the needs and interests of the students emerge. Sexuality education is exciting, complicated, and often unpredictable. As a result, the key word in curriculum development is "flexibility."
>
> In my own programs, what seems to work best are goals that are very clear, but very general, and process- rather than content-oriented. If a discussion or activity meets one or more of the following goals in at least a general way, I know we're on target.
>
> • Providing useful information in a helpful way. Because the subject matter is so personal and relevant, educators must constantly ask what is most important to include.
>
> • Focusing on human sexuality, not sex. Our sexuality—the way we think, feel, and act, and how we relate to the world that surrounds us as males and females—is a difficult concept to grasp. This is so because sexuality is experiential and abstract; you can't see it anywhere.

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- Meeting the expressed needs and interests of students. Students cannot leave a sexuality course without learning some key facts and unlearning misconceptions.
- Helping students discuss sexuality more easily. Games, puzzles, and paper exercises all help move students past a common embarrassment.
- Encouraging self-awareness.
- Teaching effective communications skills. We know that personal and sexual relationship problems are often really communications problems.
- Promoting critical thought about sexual issues and encouraging students to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills.

The same goals and approach can guide how a school deals with drug and alcohol abuse education and other sensitive aspects of contemporary life. Middle schools have recently moved toward developing sequential courses that deal with the developmental issues of growing up and thus put "touchy topics" in the realm of everyday education.

Physical education and athletics

It is a mistake to pit physical education and athletics against each other, as so often happens. Both are important ingredients of a middle school and, though they can complement each other, each should be accorded educational respect in its own right.

- Skill learning, healthy use and appreciation of the body, and the opportunity to develop positive attitudes for life are goals of both an athletic and a physical education program.

Physical education is now an accepted part of the middle school curriculum. The unavoidable problems of scheduling physical education classes (time for dressing and showers, for example) may ruffle some feathers, but everyone agrees that the school's overall program would be seriously impaired if physical education were not a part of it.

- The middle school athletic program wrestles for its proper place and at times its very existence. The question of what is proper is basic and needs to be asked.

A middle school athletic program is especially important for older students—seventh and eighth graders. The questions that need answering are ones that spring directly from conflicting core components of philosophy. Competition in sports raises the same issues as any other competition: some students flourish, others are discouraged, and some are defeated.

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Since a middle school proposes to open doors, close no one out, and allow students many different experiences, these issues must be faced. Athletic competition, like any other part of the program, does not do everything it sets out to do perfectly.

Middle schools want to offer their students every possible avenue to success. For some students, athletics does this better than anything else. By sixth or seventh grade, some students who have significant athletic potential need this success, as do students for whom drama, writing, sculpture, or mathematics offer opportunities for recognition and increased self-esteem. This positive side of competitive athletics should not be sacrificed just because some people in the school fear the pain that less athletically talented students might experience.

A sensitive and varied athletic program, essential in a middle school, needs to be carefully designed and monitored. The following guidelines may be useful in considering an athletic program that is consistent with the philosophy of the school.

The program must be open to all.

- There should be no system of tryouts to single out "winners" and "losers."
- There should be no benchwarmers in any sport. The opportunity to play at an appropriate level should be guaranteed each student.

The program needs to offer genuine options.

- For some students, playing on very good teams against other very good teams is developmentally appropriate. For other students, this option means certain failure.
- Intramural and interscholastic competition can be part of a program that gives priority to the varying developmental needs of young people.

Required participation may sound more positive than it actually is.

- Forced failure is not a positive experience for anyone.
- For some students, nonteam options make sense.
- For other students, "braving" something has merit.
- The school's physical education program can assure reluctant students some sampling of team sports in ways that are far more suitable than forced participation on an interscholastic athletic team.

Winning should not be the one and only objective of middle school athletics.

- It is not wrong, however, to help students experience the feeling of being the best they can be as a team.
- Sometimes middle school educators belittle winning and make good teams feel unappreciated and misguided.
- Winning isn't everything, but mediocre effort and halfhearted commitment are not positive, either.

The overall health of a middle school athletic program is directly related to the health of the middle school itself.

- A philosophy of athletics that allows for enjoyment, participation, and successes that can be openly enjoyed is the same philosophy that governs everything else a good middle school does.

A middle school is in trouble when upper school thinking dominates the middle school program.

- This can be just as true in accelerated math classes or inappropriate social activities as in athletics.
- Those in charge of middle school sports must give primary consideration to the student, learner, athlete, and person.
- A middle school athletic program is not a "farm club" for the upper school.
- Pressure must not be placed on the middle school to save an ailing upper school football (or other sports) program.

Not all talents, athletic or otherwise, shine during the middle school years; dreams should not be dashed.

- A school's newspaper carried stories about two seniors—the basketball captain and an all-league first base player. As eighth graders, both of these students had been frustrated, awkward extras.

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Evaluation and grading

There is no single best way to grade and evaluate students in a middle school. What matters most about any approach is that it further a child's learning and development.

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No matter what evaluation method the school uses, it must communicate clearly. If the school is committed to giving letter grades, it should

- Educate students about what grades mean and do not mean
- Educate parents in the same way
- Accompany grades with clear, useful narrative explanations of why a certain letter grade is given for certain work
- Actively work to maintain the concept of learning for the sake of learning
- Remember that comments are more important than letter grades

If the school is committed to not giving letter grades, it should

- Train teachers to become masterful in writing comments. Too many comments simply read, "Fine job. A bit more effort could make a real difference. I enjoy having Lucy in my class. She's such a fine person and a pleasure to teach. She is behind in some of her homework, but recently I have noted some improvement." What is called for is descriptive clarity—saying clearly how a student is doing—and prescriptive ability—knowing what is needed for the student to improve.
- Feel confident that it can inform students and their parents precisely of just where a student stands
- Inform parents of what the system intends and does
- Achieve unity within the faculty so that there is no "closet grader" saying, "Your work is really an A on this," or "If I could give you a grade, you would get a B."

Scheduling

In much the same way that some magazine readers turn first to the centerfold or mystery readers flip to the end of the book, middle school people often want to know about "schedule" before anything else. They seek the answer sought by all but found by few.

John H. Lounsbury, editor of the *Middle School Journal*, gives solid advice when he says that scheduling is a clear reflection of a school's beliefs about the nature of learning and the needs of youth. Scheduling ought to be the final step in a process that takes objectives based on a careful evaluation of

human growth and development, society's expectations, and educational principles and converts them into educational experiences and opportunities. Scheduling should reflect the needs of students more than the preferences of teachers yet remain flexible and provide security to both.

A good middle school schedule does not need to be complicated; in fact, it should be as simple as possible. That schedule is best which schedules least. Unfortunately, few schools practice this wisdom.

Each school has to work out a proper schedule for itself, starting from a foundation of middle school understanding and commitment. The following lessons learned by others are worth considering.

- A school is already handicapped if it begins with the idea that high school departmentalization should determine middle school curriculum and schedule.

Middle school educators recognize that the middle school concept, by definition, is incompatible with traditional high school notions of scheduling, subjects, and teachers.

- Interdisciplinary teaming and block scheduling are logical and necessary in a middle school

There are many ways to do this kind of teaming and scheduling. All of the ways that work well give a team of teachers assigned to work with a team of students considerable flexibility and freedom from traditional disciplinary lines.

In large schools, smaller faculties and units are formed. In smaller schools, a core team faculty is created. Any team of teachers can teach all subjects, some subjects, or correlate or fuse subjects. When they are given common planning time, teachers can organize and reorganize to present material appropriately to students.

Faculty teaming does not work unless the schedule provides regular common planning time for the teachers involved.

The faculty team also becomes the foundation for a basic guidance program. It is not simply for academic reasons that middle schools have a set of teachers working exclusively with a set of students, with time set aside to allow the teachers to talk regularly with one another. For middle school students, growing up, like learning, does not fall into neatly scheduled pieces. Knowledgeable, caring, watchful teachers who watch continuously are able to know "the whole child" far better than the one who watches only during fourth period.

A school can find as many different middle school schedules as there are middle schools; each has some little "twist" of its own. Most, unfortunately, are too tightly set, too nearly parallel to a high school schedule, and too blocked by decisions that were not made on an educational basis. The

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crossover teacher—who teaches in more than one division—the influence of the high school, and determination to think departmentally can cripple the middle school scheduler from day one. Middle school administrators must push for as much scheduling autonomy as possible.

4.
THE MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATOR

"The comparison of the middle school to a foam rubber box is made to emphasize the consistent yet flexible guidance which must come from the adults in any middle school situation." — Gordon Vars, 1967

"The teachers make the difference. Just ask any kid."

"No doubt that the leadership is the key to an effective middle school."

All of the above observations are on target. There should be no competition between teachers and principal to determine who contributes most to a middle school's effectiveness. It is how these educators together serve their young adolescent charges that matters. No one can dispute that the magic of a middle school is a human magic.

The middle school teacher

Fifty independent middle school principals were asked to list the words that came to mind when they thought of middle school teachers. A tribute of this nature is rare. How would you like to be described as

- affectionate
- adaptable
- appreciative of energy and movement
- able to summon up energy to get excited about a kid when feeling empty
- awake to possibilities
- awake to the niftiness of students

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- able to use a variety of teaching techniques
- appreciative of little things students say

These are just the "A" words (see Appendix C for the full list); nearly 120 different words or phrases were used to describe a person thought by some to be able to "walk on water."

Parents, heads, principals of divisions, teachers, and board members at many schools were asked to tell about the best middle school educator they had known. Here is what some of them said.

> She is superb—wise, experienced, patient, realistic, optimistic, exceptionally well trained, supportive, open. Strong curriculum, clear teaching style. She is really "there" where she is.
>
> A friend to students, parents, and faculty alike. This educator struck the right balance. He always had time to listen and knew where and when to act on his instincts. He provided the heart of the school.
>
> She cared. I could talk to her. She was there when I needed to learn math and when I needed to get some advice. She was serious business in class, had high expectations for all of us, and convinced us we could do the work.
>
> A superb and patient listener who encouraged teachers and students to grow through his listening and responding. A strong sense of humor, process-oriented, and a confirmed conversationalist.
>
> He laughed readily with children. Classroom activities reflected his enthusiasm for experimenting with things and ideas. He was quick to offer a hug and equally comfortable saying "No" when it was required.
>
> A track coach who encouraged me during my awkward growth period. He recognized some potential when I felt others did not. He was sensitive to the feelings of those with whom he worked.

What these people recalled fondly is very much what researchers and practitioners have noted in their experience with the people who make middle schools work. A study at Harvard found that the effectiveness of middle schools was closely linked to the commitment of the teacher to the total life of students. The teachers were more concerned about encouraging students to understand how to learn rather than *what* to learn. These teachers used higher-order questioning skills and encouraged discovery of answers. Subject content was used to teach skills for continuous learning in life. Teachers knew the unique problems of teaching the age group and were able to provide clear instruction to identified cognitive levels

Serving as advisers as well as teachers, these teachers also knew the joys of the age group. Many of them were involved in teaching courses designed to develop high-interest activities for students and to provide more opportunities for guidance work. This made it possible for the teachers to mix with their students in a relaxed, nonevaluative atmosphere to ascertain their learning needs. The result was a safe, exciting, and motivational climate.

According to research reported by the National Middle School Association, effective middle school teachers

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- Have a positive self-concept
- Demonstrate warmth
- Are optimistic
- Are enthusiastic
- Are flexible
- Are spontaneous
- Accept students
- Demonstrate awareness of developmental levels
- Demonstrate knowledge of subject matter
- Use a variety of instructional activities and materials
- Structure instruction
- Monitor learning
- Ask varied questions
- Use concrete materials and focused learning strategies
- Incorporate indirectness in teaching
- Incorporate "success building" behavior in teaching
- Diagnose individual learning needs and prescribe individual instruction
- Listen
- Show respect for the dignity and worth of each individual
- Cooperate with other staff members, parents, students, and others to achieve common goals

This is not a surprising list. Let's add "have a lively sense of humor."

Hiring middle school teachers

In looking for teachers, those in the school who are responsible for hiring should know and look for characteristics like the ones listed above. Then they should follow their own "middle school instincts." Here are some additional suggestions.

• Be certain that the head of the school understands the needs and rights of the middle school by sharing the description of effective middle school

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teachers and by insisting that the middle school be in charge of hiring for the middle school.

• Involve teachers in the middle school in defining job openings and in designing and executing the hiring process.

• Devise an in-division process that expresses middle school needs clearly and helps avoid hiring teachers who first must meet some other needs of the school. Schools have a tendency to hire someone to serve primarily as an upper school coach who can "also do middle school teaching" or a music person who can "also" help with the high school orchestra instead of a middle school music educator. Order priorities and stand up for them.

• Protect the division against being a dumping ground for people who are not content or successful elsewhere in the school.

• Remember that teachers who have a lower school background may find it easier to adjust to middle school than upper school teachers.

• Some questions to ask during an interview are

"What is your experience with middle-level students?"

"What is it about teaching that gives you pleasure?"

"What can you tell about yourself as a teacher and a person?"

"What is it about this particular middle school assignment that appeals to you?"

"How long do you think you want to be in middle school teaching?"

"What might come next for you?"

• Some things to listen or look for during an interview are

Process orientation vs. subject orientation

How many times the candidate speaks of "the children"

A sense of humor

Hints of an "I-really-want-to-teach-high school" attitude

Signs of flexibility

Varied interests, versatility

A twinkle in the eye

Crossover teachers

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Sometimes what feels good and right for an individual teacher is harmful and wrong for the whole of the middle school. This can happen with teachers who choose to cross over between different divisions in the school. A middle school program requires the full energy, dedication, and constant presence of as many teachers as possible. Not only should these teachers want to be in the middle school full time; they need to be.

For some teachers the finer points of subject matter and the appreciation of sophisticated learning are what most excite them as educators. These teachers probably belong in high schools and colleges. For other teachers, their pleasure comes from a day that has both the academic challenge of high school students and middle school process and energy. The appeal of a teaching position that provides such variety is great, but if it is possible for a teacher to work full time in either the upper school or the middle school, the teacher should do one *or* the other for the good of the middle school program.

The entire middle school program can be damaged by a split allegiance, since so much of the program involves the constant availability of interested adults, flexible scheduling, a faculty available for cooperative planning, and supervision of a full school day from start to end. Any link to a scheduled set of demands beyond its own inhibits the middle school's effectiveness. Typically, crossover teachers do not have such a negative impact on an upper school's program because of fewer supervisory requirements, departmentally organized scheduling, and different attitudes and approaches.

Although the ideal is to staff the middle school with people who want to work in a middle school, the ideal is often impossible to achieve. Many independent schools have only recently committed themselves to the middle school concept, and so they must struggle to shift teachers to cover a division that did not exist when they were hired to do a different job. This is complicated and must be dealt with creatively, with positive in-service support, and without setting up "good guys" and "bad guys" in the process. Schools may benefit from the help of outside consultants—experienced middle school educators who can assist them as they move to develop a true middle school philosophy. The eventual answer to the problem of crossover teachers is to hire teachers committed to middle school education as positions open up through attrition.

In smaller schools there are practical, compelling reasons why people have to work in more than one division. Even so, a core of middle school teachers must be in place. And, when a choice is available, and when creative alternatives can eliminate crossover teachers, the school should, as part of its commitment to middle school education, work toward the goal of a self-contained middle school faculty.

Notes

The middle school principal

The job of the middle school principal (director, head) is significant. The personal style of that leader will be the style of the school. That person must at once be innovator and stabilizer, change agent and catalyst, director and participant in the burgeoning world of young adolescents, and useful listener and articulate spokesperson.

When the new principal asked the veteran teacher what she hoped he would do as the director of the middle school, she responded clearly but simply, "Just be to us what you want us to be to the students. Let us be our best." In essence, that is the job of a middle school principal.

A study made at the Harvard Graduate School of Education identified three main areas of characteristics of effective middle school principals.

Human skills

- The principals in the study were approachable and accessible. They were more interested in people than in competence. They projected a self-confidence that allowed them to concentrate on others. They were teacher-centered in much the same way that effective teachers are student-centered, and they freed teachers to be so centered

- These principals knew all students by their first names, routinely wrote thoughtful "thank you" notes to students and staff, and built up their schools as nice places in every way possible.

Management skills

- The principals knew how to use time effectively.

- They were willing to hand over scheduling, grouping, and discipline decisions to teachers so that ownership of the program might be widely shared.

- They moved to teaming patterns that gave teachers opportunities to work with a common group of students and common planning time to work with other teachers who taught those students.

- These principals appeared to incorporate in their own ideas the ideas, gifts, and skills of their staffs.

Knowledge base

- The principals were informed about curriculum, organization, evaluation, support programs, personnel work, policies, and characteristics of young adolescents.

• They were competent educators, well read, up to date on current research, involved in professional committees, and eager to examine ways to improve their schools creatively.

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In identifying these skills and their mix in successful principals, the study showed that leadership is the key to effective middle schools. Studies made by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and *Principal* magazine confirm the importance of good leadership. These sources note that principals who run their schools democratically have higher morale among their staffs. One thing they must do is determine which decisions require staff involvement.

Principal reminds school administrators of the "four C's" of decision making.

> *Consensus* when the acceptance and trust of the faculty are essential
>
> *Command* when constrained by time and need for expertise [this works only when trust has been created and the other "C's" are frequently used]
>
> *Consultation* when more information is needed
>
> *Convenience* when no cares about a decision [some faculties suffer from too much democracy, too much consensus]

The trick, of course, is learning when to use which approach.

Many people who work as middle school principals in independent schools have no written job description. They may feel as if they "do everything," but they lack the evidence. The following sample job description may be useful.

Middle School Principal: Functions and Duties

The middle school principal supervises the faculty and staff, oversees the curriculum, and directs the program of the middle school. The principal establishes a vital, positive tone compatible with middle school philosophy. As the primary administrator in the division, the principal represents the middle school within the school and without and discharges the following functions and duties.

• Evaluates the performance of middle school faculty and staff. Makes salary recommendations. Provides opportunities for growth and development. Nurtures.

• Develops and manages the middle school budget, including department budgets and faculty salaries.

• Selects new faculty members and conducts middle school job searches (in conjunction with the head of the school and the staff).

• Makes academic and nonacademic middle school faculty assignments.

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- Provides discipline as needed in the middle school. Is responsible for attendance, tardiness, deportment, and major discipline.
- Creates an active program of in-service experience for the middle school faculty. Is responsible for professional growth opportunities for the faculty.
- Oversees middle school publications or sections of publications: develops the middle school staff workbook, edits middle school sections in the school's handbooks.
- Oversees the safety of students (fire drills, dismissal, other procedures).
- Reviews, creates, and directs the middle school curriculum.
- Constructs a balanced and appropriate middle school schedule.
- Clerks weekly middle school faculty meetings. Is responsible for the business of the middle school.
- Possesses a sensitive and complete concept of middle school programming and represents and articulates this concept within the school and without.

This sample job description, which is fairly typical, shows that the middle school principal is crucial to the success of the middle school. No wonder the job is exciting, varied, and full. No wonder it requires an extraordinary person who can make such a difference.

5.
MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS

"Sometimes I feel that my being an adolescent is more of a growth process for my dad than it is for me."

—A middle school student

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in *Gift from the Sea*, asks, "Is it not possible that middle age can be looked upon as a period of second flowering, second growth, even a second kind of adolescence?" She notes characteristics so often seen as "decay" in middle aged people, "discontent, restlessness, doubt, despair, longing," and claims that these are the same signs viewed as normal in young people entering adolescence.

Laurence Steinberg, of the Center of Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has outlined the changes that occur during adolescence and those that occur during midlife. He then notes the complementary transitions, which he sees as a challenging time for a family because of the simultaneous metamorphoses of parent and child. His study provides a sensible starting point for understanding how to work effectively with parents of middle schoolers.

For adolescents, a primary change is in their appearance and stature as they leave off the look of a child. They become capable of thinking in terms of possibilities and imagining hypothetical situations. Their thinking becomes more logical, more abstract, and consists much more of questioning. It is also true that adolescents are accorded new privileges and new expectations by society more quickly than by their families.

While adolescents are making these changes, many of their parents are living through the ages between thirty-five and forty-five. Their parents may be more concerned about their own actual or perceived physical changes and competence. The second change for these adults is one of perspective as they turn from thoughts about years of productivity and "years alive" to thoughts of "years left." Another change comes as they find that they are part of what is viewed as "old fashioned."

Parent and child seem to be moving simultaneously in opposite di-

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rections. The adolescent sees in the world new possibilities and endless hypothetical situations to consider; the adult sees time running out. The young person approaches adult society thinking of what is ahead in work, career, and life, while the parent may feel stuck on a plateau. The one is energized to initiate; the other fears that he or she may have lost that chance.

Little wonder, then, that parents may have a sense of dread as their children enter early adolescence and middle school. Even though neither is well informed as to what to expect during this period of adjustment, harmonious parent-child relationships somehow continue to be the norm. Adolescents and their parents struggle, but so do young children and their parents. Families become strained when they fail to adapt to normal changes in family members.

In addition, schools need to reflect on the ways in which parenthood has changed. Contemporary parenthood reflects contradictory elements of parenthood during the past several decades, which makes the present day difficult for everyone. Adolescents face a lonely yet noisy culture. Their music, with lyrics that dwell on depression and broken relationships, encourages passivity. Society seems filled with instant pain relief, fast food, and pushbuttons for everything. Sex is a dominating force, thinness is beauty, athletic strength is power.

Peer acceptance depends on these ephemeral values. Because parents are shut out of what is most "in" for their children, they may end up pushing their children to achieve academically, something they do understand and value. When parents talk about "old" values—delayed gratification, abstinence, perseverance—their children often are unmoved.

When parents are worried and confused, they can push educators into corners, forcing them to defend their territory and resist what often appears to be irrational, emotional, and difficult behavior on the part of parents. Educators can fail to see that the behavior they work with daily in children is often displayed by parents as well. Although it is not always easy to understand the actions and motivations of the parents of middle schoolers, educators need to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it so that the school can try to help them and their children.

Understanding parents' needs

The parents we work with love and respect their children, but they struggle because they do not always accept the things their children are doing. The parents want communication and positive relationships, but they sometimes go at this in unproductive ways. To form real partnerships with parents and best serve students, middle school educators must bear in mind certain universal aspects of school/parent relations.

• Most parents want answers, often quite legitimately, but there are some questions schools can not and should not answer.

Because they may be accustomed to specialists who prescribe and diagnose, they want the school to do the same. Society is troubled by issues beyond the home and school, and parents come to school meetings asking for help and support, such as written guidelines for parties in private homes, or a school-prepared list indicating which parents disapprove of alcohol at parties. One parent even asked a school head, "How can my child handle Saturday unless you tell me what to have him do?"

• The middle school years can be a difficult time for parents, who in some ways are scared of their own children who aren't little any more.

• Parents of middle schoolers sometimes look to the school for the same kind of patience and support that it gives their children.

• The school cannot help children without also helping their parents.

• Just as students are varied, so are their parents.

Within the parent body (749 families) of one school, for example, were 257 people working in public service, 211 in private industry, 208 attorneys, 166 educators (fifty-two in higher education), 126 physicians (including seventeen psychiatrists), and fifty-eight in other health and welfare-related occupations.

• Parents have basic needs that parallel their children's needs. At just the time their children have a "peer focus" and "peer support," they may in fact feel quite alone.

A school serves itself, its students, and parents best by making opportunities for parents to talk and be "normal" with other parents. Parent peer groups have become a popular answer to parents' needs in many schools. (See Appendix D, "Parent Peer Groups.")

• Schools cannot assume that the parents of their students have values in common either with the school or with one another.

Family values can cover a far wider range than values involved in academic issues. For example, a middle school principal might work up the courage to tell a parent, taking care not to accuse, that "there is reason to wonder, at least, whether the child is experimenting with drugs," only to learn that the parent and child smoke marijuana together.

• The school must take care to offer educationally sound programs and not be pushed into doing what some parents feel they are"buying" by sending their children to an institution of high reputation and high tuition.

There are pressures from within the school as well as from parents to accelerate the curriculum inappropriately, with the result that students are

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pushed past sensible and needed instruction into unreasonable stress.

Parents, like educators, do not always approach problems in the most direct and productive way. Here are some behaviors that middle school educators may encounter in working with parents, as well as some suggestions for making these encounters more useful. (Each school can add its own observed behaviors and supply its own examples.)

Proving they care. Parents will argue, expound, and go to great lengths to show that they are involved, caring, good parents. On any issue on which one parent may take a stand, the very next parent may well present, with equal conviction, a diametrically opposed opinion. The school can help parents sort out what their concern really is, while recognizing, too, that sometimes parents are right and the school wrong.

Solving problems themselves. Some parents seize on the moment when the school is having trouble with their child, promptly and protectively to claim the problem, solve it for the child, and "save the day." When this happens, children lose a valuable opportunity to solve problems for themselves. This needs to be pointed out to parents.

Uniting against a common foe. Some parents, to establish a working communication with their middle school child, accept the child's inappropriate behavior and defend it against an "intruding" school. But when the school becomes the enemy, no one is well served. This kind of us-against-them approach needs to be modified.

Seeing things only in terms of their child. Parents' vision is narrowed by the moment, their judgment measured in relation to the child they support and love. And who would fault them for this? As educator Lilian Katz says, parents are supposed to be subjective about their kids; that's their job. But the school needs to articulate its philosophy and programs in such a way that parents can see and accept the bigger picture. It is also possible that the school has made a mistake or that it is not the right place for a particular child.

Losing appropriate control. Some parents are controlled by children who have been given the upper hand. The school can help them to see that and to work to reassert themselves, at the same time recognizing how hard it can be for parents to acknowledge such a situation.

Claiming to speak for "all parents." Some parents of middle schoolers claim to speak for entire groups, who "all agree" with their contentions. The school can help them see the real dimensions of a given issue.

Some advice for parents

Parents ask the same question their middle school children ask: "Am I normal?" Anything the school can do to assure them that the answer is

almost always "yes" is worth doing. The hints and the advice that follow are based on common sense. Because it is sometimes difficult for parents to envision such solutions when they are too close to a situation, it may prove helpful to share these suggestions with parents.

Notes

- Choose your issues, your conflicts, and your battles carefully. Of the thousands of opportunities to disagree, many can and should be avoided.

Here is a simple test to help you choose: if it is not going to make any difference to anyone two years from now, let it go. Select your issues carefully because you don't want to wear out your ability to talk, negotiate, or influence things that do matter. Don't lose it all over your child's room. When the pile of clothes, pizza crusts and Pepsi cans, missing school assignment papers, and overdue library books gets unbearable to the one who made the mess, it will be dealt with. The phone, the hair style, the clothes worn, the friends chosen, and the homework undone are also poor candidates for the "two years from now" test.

- Applaud lots of things—dreaming, playing, running, painting, befriending, caring for a pet—as well as academic achievement.

Young people need to be encouraged and recognized for all the things they do well, even when this just means "better than last time." Intellectual genius, artistic brilliance, and athletic record setting are rare "gifts." Parents need to keep their eyes, hearts, minds, and mouths open to every opportunity to encourage and support, to applaud and cheer on, the many accomplishments of their children.

- Don't measure your child in strictly academic terms.

Parents sometimes take their child's failure to attain a preset goal harder than their child takes it. As one school head reminded parents, "You must realize that there is more to growing than school. It is at home that children are shaped. If parents feel good about themselves, it is likely that their children will have high self-esteem." Another school head was even clearer: "We must give each child the right to be a unique individual and not just fulfill our aspirations. The road map we have followed may not be the same as our child's."

- You need "peer support" just as much as your children do.

Parents need to be able to meet with other parents to compare notes about issues concerning their children and the school. Parent peer groups are one way of bringing parents together. Most schools that have parent peer groups organize them around grade levels. They meet regularly throughout the school year. (See Appendix D.)

- Treasure your children's ability to talk with and communicate comfortably with other adults.

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These are the years when young people badly need "an ear." Just because children have become middle schoolers does not mean that they do not want to talk with adults. But it is hard on parents all of a sudden not to be the ones to receive that openness on a daily basis. Parents need to be certain that there are such "ears" available and not be jealous or upset when the ears are not theirs.

- Learn all you can about the developmental aspects of this age group, and then enjoy your child. Move with the energy instead of fighting it.

6. IMPORTANT MIDDLE SCHOOL ISSUES

This final chapter deals with more general considerations not covered in earlier chapters. Attention to these issues can only enrich a middle school and the experience of everyone connected with it.

Advisory groups and advisers

Middle schools use advisory groups in many different ways, but most middle school advisory systems have a philosophy and purpose similar to the one defined by the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, in New York.

> Advisory is essentially a comprehensive, school-oriented, one-to-one relationship between the adviser and the advisee for the purposes of communication and direction. It is also a home base for announcements, attendance, and other activities. Advisory provides each student with at least one staff member who has a thorough knowledge of that student's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and personal growth. Advisory enables each student to have an adult advocate in the school, a person who can champion the advisee's cause in student-teacher, student-administrator, and student-student interactions.

The role of the adviser can be defined in terms of four functions, as follows.

The adviser-advisee relationship provides the student with both a person and a structure to help resolve school concerns.

The advisory group function consists of regular meetings for communication on all school-related concerns and membership in a small, supportive group—a nest for comfort and a nest to "fly from."

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Adviser-parent contact provides for communication about the growth and progress of the student. The adviser, the first point of contact and conversation for parents, serves as the main source of information about a student in the school.

Adviser-staff interaction provides for exchange of information about all areas of a student's growth and for sharing approaches, methods, successes, and failures in working with individual students. (The widest definition of the word "staff" is intended here: teachers, administrators, office personnel, aides, custodians, coaches, student teachers, lunchroom staff.)

"Teacher as counselor" is assumed within the middle school. Although most teachers have neither the skills nor the training for some of the major tasks asked of a professional school counselor, they can do much to help in the routine matters of growing up—the normal, regular, and important confusions felt by middle schoolers. This nonacademic support role is basic to any advisory system.

Each school must define its own advisory system; there is no one correct way. "Home basing" students is wise no matter what design is chosen. Younger middle schoolers are often placed in advisory groups that are part of their regular home rooms. Older middle schoolers are most often placed in small groups having mixed ages and grades. Some schools find single-grade group advisories more comfortable and practical.

What feels and seems right for the school is most likely to be right, but a few basic assumptions should be kept in mind.

- Advisers need to understand and accept the complicated dual role of an advisory system: the personal support of reassuring the student about not being allowed to "fall between the cracks" and the group comfort of having a place to feel at home and belong. Students need both during these years.

- Ample time must be allotted to the advisory system. The success of any and all systems depends on the school's commitment to sufficient time.

- Advisers are often uncomfortable with the advisory role because it opens doors to personal issues and concerns beyond the simple and usual "Am I normal?" aspects of young adolescent development. The school needs to offer teachers training in how to be advisers, how to listen, how to give support, and when to get help. The best middle schools have a middle school counselor on hand to support and train advisers and to be ready for referrals when needed.

- Many schools have formalized instruction in affective education as part of their advisory program. Some schools use commercial life-skills programs, and other schools have coordinators who assist advisers in planning for appropriate and regular lessons.

Behavior

Notes

Middle school students behave in countless ways that annoy and trouble adults. Their teachers can list these troublesome behaviors endlessly.

- Kids kicking doors open
- Kids exhibiting the "I didn't know" syndrome (when they haven't done their homework)
- Kids making derogatory remarks about another student's answers or comments
- Kids slurping up pudding without a spoon or taking all of the french fries
- Kids screaming for no apparent reason

The list has no end. Middle school teachers, however confident they feel about most things, do not feel uniformly comfortable as disciplinarians. Some teachers will walk all the way around the school building to avoid the hall where the eighth graders congregate. Some teachers will turn to start a conversation when they see peanut butter being spread on a child's chair or become even more engrossed in the assembly program when two girls braid each other's hair during a visiting speaker's presentation. In these same schools are also the "heavies," who carry the load of handling behavior and discipline, alienating and tiring themselves while receiving little appreciation from their colleagues who so readily duck the issue.

Certain resentments and divisiveness exist in many middle schools. The "heavy" resents the apathy and caution of colleagues, and colleagues resent students' behavior. Behavior is handled inconsistently and students are confused. On top of this, middle school faculties pride themselves on their diversity in style and personality; nowhere does this diversity reflect itself so dramatically as in responses to student behavior. In fact, one particular faculty agreed that the lunchroom doughnut-sale behaviors were too controversial to discuss in faculty meetings.

Most middle school faculties probably doubt that they could all agree that certain behaviors are unacceptable for their school. This is wrong on two counts. First, most faculties can agree on such behaviors if they stop to look, listen, and discover them for themselves. Second, though rules should be restricted to things that matter most, it is wrong for students to be confused about expectations. Unacceptable behaviors for middle school students do exist: not as many as some people think, and more than some others think, but there are some.

One middle school decided that it had to address common behavior standards for students after receiving criticism in its formal evaluation. Almost a full year of study and discussion led the faculty to a list of fourteen

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behaviors identified as "hair trigger." By consensus, the faculty agreed to give a hair-trigger response whenever any of these unacceptable-to-all student behaviors occurred. The three-step response, when any faculty member observed the behavior, was to

- Address the behavior immediately, publicly or privately, whichever the situation called for.
- Stop it.
- Deal right away with the person or group involved or make a time to deal with it soon afterward if it was not possible to handle it on the spot, as during an assembly.

Here are the fourteen behaviors the faculty agreed to address.

- Physical abuse of another student
- Destroying or damaging another student's work
- Writing on walls
- Drawing on or carving school furniture
- Throwing things in the dining room
- Talking or clowning around during and assembly, performance, or other large group gathering
- Drawing on bulletin board displays
- Stealing
- Insulting or putting down another student
- Talking during Quaker silence
- Casting aspersions on another's intelligence
- Cheating on tests
- Lying to avoid punishment for wrongdoing
- Racial and sexual insults, written or verbal

Although this list belongs to one school, two important things can be learned from it: (1) to their own amazement, a faculty of forty teachers of wide-ranging experience, age, and outlook were able to reach consensus on what was unacceptable and what they would all do about it, and (2) they made no list of punishments and no prescription of set ways for teachers to deal with problems. Flexibility remained sacred. Their plan stayed open and purposely inconsistent. At the same time, it promised one important consistency: whoever saw hair-trigger behavior was to address it and stop it. How they dealt with it did not matter. Such flexible consistency is perfect for middle school behavior management.

Because there are many different acceptable ways to handle behavior, it is essential to handle situations personally and individually. What works with individuals is right. Flexible consistency, following instincts, and knowing both the individual student and middle schoolers in general are the main ingredients in encouraging good behavior.

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Competition

The evils of competition fill middle school philosophy statements. Middle school teachers become upset at the entry of any new form of competition aspects in their program. Discussions about athletics, about grades, about high schools, and about awards are always heated in middle school faculty meetings. Almost always middle school educators come out as firmly opposed to competition. Most middle school faculties approach violence when eighth grade students wish to announce "the cutest," "the most popular," and "class clown" in an awards ceremony to mark the end of their middle school years.

Those who oppose competition are concerned about the damage and pain it may cause "losers" and, to a lesser degree, the damage it might do to "winners." They tend to overreact and eliminate award giving, announcing successes, and cheering for team victories. An almost unnatural silence is created out of respect for those who will go unmentioned. Another way of seeing it is to cheer the successes that students experience but to seek out and recognize many different kinds of success so that no one goes unapplauded. This can be a positive alternative to both the exclusiveness of announcing only a few successes and the silence that celebrates nothing.

One Seattle school has monthly award assemblies within its small eighth grade class in which all students are recognized for personal successes, achievements, and improvements. Students think of the things they have done better or of things that classmates should be recognized for. The emphasis is always on the positive, and each student is regularly shown to be a "winner."

With competition viewed in this light, recognition of the star athlete is fine, but so is announcing that Cameron won a skateboard competition and reading some outstanding poetry by Julie. Making successes seem somehow tainted and unmentionable is a mistake, for vulnerable young adolescents desperately want acceptance, any proof of being OK, and acknowledgment by others. Schools need to find all of the winning that goes on and then encourage it, recognize it, and flaunt it. Done right, all these kinds of recognition belong in the middle school.

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Cooperation with public schools

Wonderful, natural educational partners exist in all communities and neighborhoods. Public schools have much to offer to independent schools, and the reverse is also true. Public schools often house the diversity that independent schools seek to achieve. Public schools often lack some of the enrichment possibilities that independent schools take for granted. Facilities, staffs, families, and specialized programs can be paired for positive results.

Although one-shot occasions are usually simple to arrange, real educational value comes from jointly planned and jointly executed programs that tie schools and their people together over a period of time. This works best when both school environments are used and all participants can be both givers and receivers. It might start start with sharing good assemblies with neighborhood public schools or performing for and with each other, but it should not stop at that level.

Gender

As with multicultural education (see below), the middle school can be the center of consciousness and action with regard to gender issues. Schools need to reject sexism as strongly as they reject racism. Confusion about where to start may inhibit action. There is nothing wrong with an honest statement that the school is not sure what to do first, as long as it makes a start. Among the many gender issues to be considered (see Anne Chapman, *The Difference It Makes*, published by NAIS), perhaps the most fundamental one is gender bias in the classroom.

Myra Sadker and David Sadker, professors at American University and students of sexism in the classroom from grade school to graduate school, have concluded that male students receive more attention from teachers and are given more time to talk in classrooms. Further, they have found that

- Both male and female teachers show this bias.
- Educators are generally unaware of the presence and the impact of this bias.
- Once made aware of the bias, teachers want to change their behavior.
- Brief but focused training can reduce or eliminate sex bias from classroom interaction.

- Increasing equity in classroom interaction also increases the effectiveness of the teacher.

Notes

In paying attention to gender issues as a basic educational responsibility, the middle school can

- Understand the realities of gender bias in the classroom and look, nondefensively, at all aspects of the program. Appropriate training is crucial.

- Conduct a self-study of the school and its attitudes toward gender. What materials and concepts are taught? Who is teaching them? What is the program in athletics? in physical education? Who participates in which activities? Who receives the school's awards? What stereotypes does the school encourage? What is the school doing for individual students? the shy? the different? What doors does the school keep closed?

- Respond actively as needed following the self-study.

- Consider forming a standing committee on gender issues that monitors progress and suggests new directions.

Leadership and participation

The teachers who work best with middle schoolers are those who learn to use students' energy and do not waste time trying to contain or control it. Middle schoolers are best educated when they are permitted to "do." Middle schoolers like science fairs, multicultural fairs, and other opportunities to build, research, and display. The highlight for some eighth grader could be to be responsible for keeping school attendance or revising a poorly written social studies book. It could be writing a high-interest storybook for undermotivated younger students. It could be a class project in archaeology involving an old house ready for demolition.

Students want chances to learn to lead. They need different ways to try out "being in charge." Within classes, activities, and daily school life such opportunities should be frequent. To this end, many middle schools have options periods or activity time slots in which students have group membership, leadership roles, and group activities. Students choose activities and roles within these activities. Middle schoolers love group activities, group assignments, and regrouping to accomplish something collectively, all of which encourage leadership.

Notes

A middle school counselor: yes or no?

Although few middle school questions are ever answered with a simple "yes" or "no," the answer to the question "Should each middle school have a counselor?" is "Yes!" A middle school needs to have a trained counselor.

Everything that a middle school does centers on appreciation and developmental understanding of the young adolescent. The advisory system, curriculum design, the people selected to teach, and all other aspects of the program are founded on a commitment to the "whole child." Working with the whole child means providing the necessary forms of support. Educator Emyrtle Bennett says that the goal of middle school counseling is to help students understand themselves in

- How they relate to others
- Who they are
- What they want out of life
- What their likes and dislikes are
- How they can best make use of their abilities

Teachers are always ready to listen, support, encourage, and counsel, but only to a certain extent. Teachers are hired to educate and give support to students. In their search to be normal, students struggle with hundreds of nonacademic issues during the course of the school year. Teachers can help with many of these, but there are times when students need and deserve something more. There also are times when a teacher has other obligations or when a student's needs are too consuming, too complicated, or too vital to be worked on by an amateur, no matter how well-meaning. A trained counselor can help students with the normal growing-up issues that require understanding beyond that of the classroom teacher. And some problems go beyond what even a trained school counselor can handle. Outside referrals are needed for complicated, long-term emotional problems that require professional help beyond what the school can provide.

Schools and teachers generally handle low-level matters well and realize when outside help is needed. But concerns that fall somewhere in the middle can go unattended or be referred to expensive counseling support personnel while needlessly alarming parents or taking time away from teaching. For such mid-range issues schools should have trained counselors in place. There are more than enough of these to fill a counselor's day even if the job description reads, simply, "Be there for the students and teachers."

Middle schools that hire counselors do not do so to release teachers from their role as adviser and supporter. A trained counselor provides expertise, support, and the assurance to teachers that they will not be asked to do what

they cannot do well. The teacher's role as counselor is actually enhanced by the presence of a school counselor, for having this additional person on the staff can help the middle school serve the "whole child" in full accordance with the philosophy of middle school education.

Notes

Mixed age groups

A nervous but convinced middle school principal invited a dance group of elderly people to perform at an assembly. The students had few older people in their lives, but they did like music and dance. The day before the visit the dance teacher called to ask for extra room for the dancers in wheelchairs. She also reminded the principal that everyone at the assembly was to take part. If the principal sounded calm in that conversation, he certainly did not feel that way as he thought of all the potentially awkward moments that might lie ahead.

The principal took his seat at the assembly with many second thoughts, but as the program got under way he saw that there was no discomfort on the part of any of the visitors or the middle schoolers. Inability to walk, being confined to wheelchairs, and having to ask very directly for assistance only made the visitors more honest and open with the always honest and open middle schoolers. The students invited their guests back, and this time the principal felt no anxiety.

Brooklyn Friends School, in New York, formed a joint chorus of elderly people from a nearby Jewish community center and fifth graders. The Academy Award–winning documentary film *Close Harmony* captures the deep personal relationships that grew up between the old and the young—their friendship, love, and cooperation. Many other schools have patterned arts, music, writing, and cooking projects on this model.

Within schools themselves are other opportunities for mixed-age experiences and ventures. Schools with grades K-12 offer middle schoolers a chance to receive volunteer help from older students and to give the same kind of help to younger students on a regular, purposeful basis. Tutoring, story reading, listening, handholding, zoo visiting, teacher assisting, joint trips, and other natural chances to become acquainted and befriend are right down the hall or just next door.

Multicultural education

Our schools embrace statements of philosophy that include firm, positive commitments to diversity. Statements like this one of the Pacific Northwest

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Association of Independent Schools, developed by its committee on racial concerns, are increasingly being presented.

> The reality of prejudice limits and damages our community and society. Historically, independent schools have been one instrument for the isolation of groups and have not significantly demonstrated the pluralism we affirm as a nation. In today's world it is essential for our students to live and work with people of other races and cultures. By living together as children with others who are different, in association with adults whose actions demonstrate the value they place on pluralism, our students grow to become adults who appreciate the differences among people. Therefore, we believe our schools must act plainly now on our belief in the value of cultural and ethnic diversity.

Students are remarkably nondiverse in most independent schools, and so we must do better what we say. The starting point can be the middle school.

All students, not just students of color, need a variety of role models, friends, and acquaintances. Among adult role models there must be diversity, too. Schools need people of color in the faculty and administration, on the board of trustees, and among the parent body. In the curriculum, schools must teach and provide a multicultural education and experience. Lip service to this basic educational concept is easy, but often schools do not even know what they are voicing. The Renton, Washington, public school district has developed the following statement on multicultural education.

> *DEFINITION.* Multicultural education is an interdisciplinary process rather than a single program or series of activities. This process promotes the recognition, understanding, and acceptance of ethnic/cultural diversity and a respect for individual uniqueness within a multicultural society.
>
> *METHOD.* Implementation of this process requires representative ethnic and cultural history and content to be included in all of the disciplines; it involves ethnic staff representation; and it involves training in the history and culture of representative ethnic/cultural groups, cross-cultural communication and developing a positive school climate for all staff and students. It may also include ethnic/cultural, recognition of various holidays and special events.
>
> *GOAL.* The basic goal is to help students and staff accept themselves and other persons as having dignity and worth, with an appreciation of (not necessarily agreement with) similarities and differences among individuals and groups. Students and adults are able to demonstrate respect and acceptance for a wider range of diversity, whether physical, psychological, cultural, ethnic, age, or gender.

Present demographic realities make a multicultural approach obligatory. Beyond that, the acceptance and enjoyment of cultural pluralism is education's most exciting challenge today.

This is not a middle school issue, but it is another place where the middle school's relative freedom from constraint and whole-person focus and attitude make it a natural leader. Let the middle school find ways to open the school to the wider community. Let it believe in affirmative action in ad-

mitting students and in hiring new teachers. Let it be certain that there are minority candidates for each opening.

Because few multicultural curriculum experts are yet to be found in our schools, changes will not happen overnight. Teachers do not need to feel guilty that they don't know it all. But each teacher could, for example, learn about one culture or one ethnic group and then incorporate the viewpoints, experiences, joys, and trials of that group into everything studied. In another year a second culture could be infused.

Although these are simple steps, they are active ones. Changes in approach and attitude that take place in the middle school can affect an upper school in very deep ways. The middle school can have significant impact on the entire school when it develops and carries forward a multicultural educational program.

The Department of Diversity and Multicultural Services at NAIS has information about resources in multicultural education, including the NAIS Multicultural Assessment Plan and Instrument, which can help schools understand where they are and where they want to go.

Networking

A handbook for teachers new to the Cleveland public school system is titled "You're Not Alone." Middle school educators hunger for that same reassurance. Universities have been slow to provide specific training for people interested in this level of education, and professional workshops are most often directed toward high school teachers or lower school educators. Until recently, little has been specifically constructed for middle school specialists. Because of this void, few opportunities have existed for networking with others who share the same focus and who are sparked by the same early-adolescent energies. Almost no meeting of middle school educators ends without considerable time being given to figuring out ways to "keep in touch." "How can we maintain this network?" is a question that is always asked.

Networks can form formally or informally, locally or within area associations of schools. Individuals can take the lead in bringing support groups together and keeping them in touch. Unofficially organized efforts are often the ones that middle school educators value most. Anyone can take the initiative to form or join such a group. This handbook could be used as a starting point for discussion. What do you agree with? What is most useful? What don't you agree with?

Attending workshops and other educational conferences having a middle school focus almost guarantees a network. Workshops with a middle school

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focus are increasingly common. Three resources especially useful to those with middle school interests and seeking middle school advice and support are

The Center for Early Adolescence
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Suite 223, Carr Mill Mall
Carrboro, North Carolina 27510
(919) 966-1148

Center for Research and Development on
Elementary and Middle Schools
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 N. Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218
(301) 338-8000

National Middle School Association
4807 Evanswood Drive
Columbus, Ohio 43229-6292
(614) 848-8211

All three groups have numerous publications and reports on research. Their mailing lists are extensive. The newsletter of the Center for Research and Development on Elementary Schools is especially helpful. The National Middle School Association publishes a journal full of pertinent material and holds an annual national conference. Both organizations are oriented toward public schools, but the issues they address are common to all schools. We must acknowledge that much of what is happening in middle school education today is happening within the public school system.

A number of sessions and workshops at the NAIS annual conference are devoted to middle school issues, and the Elementary/Middle Schools Committee of NAIS works to ensure that middle schools figure prominently on the association's agenda.

Service

Middle schoolers are the most positive, most energetic, most available volunteers around. There is almost no task that they won't volunteer to do if given the chance. Students at this age love to do, to act, to live, to experience. The in-school possibilities for service are many for middle schoolers because upper school students are far less willing to give their

time, and lower schoolers aren't physically able to do as much. When middle schoolers have a chance to help out beyond the school, they respond positively to this level of trust and see their service as a privilege as well as a responsibility.

A service component can easily be made part of the mixed age activities described above. What else can we do for and with elderly people besides just sing? How else can we help the kindergarten teacher, who has so many little children to teach and care for? The healthiest thing about service activities involving middle schoolers is the purity and honesty of their response. They want to help, to write letters to save whales and baby seals, free hostages, stop strip mining. They want their parents to understand hunger, soup kitchens, and homeless children and to do whatever they can. To middle schoolers this all still makes sense.

The enjoyment of taking a group of handicapped people shopping, the excitement of sharing the zoo's gorilla with a little friend, and the pleasure of canvassing the school's neighborhood or cleaning the park are good experiences in themselves. If middle schoolers were given all the opportunities to serve the community that they would enjoy, lifetime habits would be set, and upper schools would never need to declare community service a "graduation requirement."

Notes

Transitions

A middle school proudly claims a legitimate place in time and education and a significance beyond its transitional nature. At the same time, part of what a middle school does is to allow young people to make a transition between two traditionally understood and accepted stages of schooling. Students enter a middle school comfortable with a homeroom approach, a single teacher and a constant group of classmates who have studied together in a family-like setting. Students leave the middle school for a school experience where classes are defined in departmental terms and are taught by a divergent group of personalities who care deeply about their individual, favorite subjects.

The middle school needs to figure out how to respond to the learner received and the learner sent on. Even though the developmental characteristics of young adolescents set a time schedule and determine the approach, it is necessary for the middle school to respond to the person before, during, and after middle school. This is transition.

Because many schools go from kindergarten through grade 12, transitions between divisions do not necessarily involve a change in schools. A number of schools end in the middle; there, the transition to high school

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becomes more general, more theoretical. In all cases, linking the levels of education is often done poorly. There are reasons why this happens; to understand them may be helpful.

Unnecessary defensiveness exists within divisions and levels of education. Each level understands itself and justifiably feels pride in itself. Unfortunately, unrealistic, unwise, "loaded" comparisons are often made. Educators within the divisions of a school must learn about the developmental needs of young people of ages with whom they do not work, learn the philosophy of other levels of education, and trust that the educators at other levels know what they are doing. Just as middle school educators demand their right to design their program using their expertise, the same license must be given to the educators who work out programs at other levels. The letting go that needs to occur as students move to the next appropriate level of schooling is not easy for educators.

Lower schools may feel that they alone nurture and care. They supervise everything, solve problems, and guarantee constant security, warmth, and individual support. They work hard to not hurry the child. They deal constantly with the whole person and strive to let the child be a child.

Upper schools may feel that they alone teach, stimulate academically, and prepare young people for "life out there." They sense an urgency to cover material, to share their love of information, and to educate young people to the harsh realities of failure and disillusionment. Knowing what colleges and parents require and expect, they may feel that there is no time available for getting "off track."

The middle school fits between these two approaches. Lower schoolers' parents worry as "little children" enter something they fearfully call "disco city." Middle school parents worry whether their children will get into *any* college if they spend time doing anything but solving math problems and reading the classics. They champ at the bit for "real school" (high school). Parents have the same apprehensions and confusions that educators along the K-12 educational pathway have. Tensions are fueled and refueled.

Working hard on transitions is worth every moment that can be dedicated to it, and the middle school can take the lead going both directions. The following points are worth considering as schools work to ensure good transitions.

Transition from lower to middle school. Because parents, educators, and students all need help with the transition from lower to middle school, programs directed to all three populations should be planned. Students are often excited about "moving up" because it symbolizes "growing up." They have watched with curiosity and anticipation as others have gone before. Shared assemblies, mixed-age experiences, and special projects that bring middle schoolers and lower schoolers together gradually are examples of programs that can help.

Lower and middle school faculties need to become acquainted. Talking about the children who will be shared and who have been shared forms a common base. Knowing what the other division intends, how it does it, and why it does it is important. Scheduling ways to communicate throughout the year is better than an official "passing on" of students as the year ends. The middle school should enjoy what the lower school has to say, learn from it, and give the lower school teachers confidence that their good work is not in vain and that the next step will be different, but logical, as the children change in natural and normal ways. These teachers need to feel that their experience will continue to prove valuable in the years to come.

It is for the parents of lower schoolers that the most must be done. The middle school principal has the responsibility of being available to lower school parents. The differences between lower and middle school must be articulated without jargon. Parents worry that "all hell will break loose" in the middle school, that the walls will tumble down if the foolish middle school hasn't already torn them down, and that eighth graders will teach their little children about sex, drugs, and rudeness. Although such worries come from distorted vision, they cannot be denied. Nondefensive patience and clear articulation are essential. Parents may not know how to say it, but in many ways they are asking for help as they move into their next stage of parenting. The middle school should provide such assistance.

In all aspects of this transition, middle school students can be excellent assistants. They can best introduce what a middle school is, and they are there to help new students in their first months.

Transition from middle to upper school. Whether middle schoolers are moving to the upper division of the same school or switching schools, the middle school needs to be certain that they have a variety of occasions for sampling high school life, high school personalities, and the high school program. This needs to happen without "selling out" the important last year of middle school. Heightened fear of the next step occurs just as the middle schooler outgrows middle school confines; ambivalence is the rule. Middle schoolers need organized and systematic opportunities for talking about their anxieties and observations about high school.

Visits to an upper school are essential but often confusing. Some high school teachers want to impress young visitors with the rigor of their program, the difficulty of their subject, and their "college-like" approach to teaching. Simultaneously, upper school students who play host to middle school visitors focus on "You won't believe the homework" and "The high school students won't be that mean to you." The combination of fearing the older students and being either intimidated or bored by high school teachers creates real anxiety.

In nonaccusatory ways the middle school can help the upper school understand middle schoolers' reactions and worries. The upper school

Notes

Notes

needs to determine how much, but some "fuss" needs to be made during middle schoolers' visits. Annual visits from the high school counselor and principal with course offering books in hand are not a satisfactory transition. The middle school must team up with the high school to ensure an acceptable and inviting tone.

The middle school, for its part, must learn about the nature of high school education and articulately share what it knows about the nature of the learners who are moving on. Middle and upper schools can share their experiences with zest and trust, and the middle school can ask the high school to try to personalize visits and conversations. Tensions exist between divisions when they do not understand each other's mission and methods. These tensions can be reduced by good faith and good communication.

Education is different at different points, and it should be. Educators in other divisions are there because they have chosen other legitimate aspects of education as their personal favorites. What happens at any point of education is best understood in context, and much of what happens and why it happens is not well understood from the periphery. Middle schools, having been misjudged by many misinformed critics, should spare others this same kind of tiring, uninformed criticism.

In a workshop for middle and upper school leaders, each group was asked to generate a list of "wishes" to be shared with the other group, starting with"We wish that the middle school . . ." and"We wish that the upper school . . ." The two groups came together to read the lists and then formed mixed groups to generate some solutions. The convergences between the two lists were astonishing as each group struggled to work past their misconceptions and envision ways of working together. (See Appendix E for the results)

Transition must continue after students are in their new setting. They cannot just be left to sink or swim, and the process of removing their "water wings" needs to be explained and made positive and inviting. Any transition between divisions deserves time and cooperation, for it consumes sizable parts of the last year of one division and the first year of the next. Like the parents of lower school students, parents new to high school also need support and information. They are in transition, too.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A
LEARNING AND LEARNERS

Middle school educators need to be aware of current thought and understanding concerning learning and learners. These discoveries and theories affect not just the middle school. We can mention only some of this theory here.

Learning disabilities have come to be better understood. Issues of self-esteem are fundamental in a middle school, where problems are significantly multiplied for students whose learning does not follow standard pathways or misses usual circuits. Schools must be responsive to these students and to how they learn. Because the middle school is a place where educators have a natural, sensitive propensity to understand their students, properly focused programs and teachers can help avoid permanent damage to the self-esteem of already vulnerable learners.

Middle school educators need to think seriously about neurological growth and its impact. For example, eleven-year-olds experience a spurt in brain and skull growth that permits the brain to handle logic and abstract ideas, but no such growth takes place in the thirteen- or fourteen-year-old. Jane M. Healy, author of *Your Child's Growing Mind* (Doubleday, 1987) and learning specialist at Hathaway Brown School, in Cleveland, says, "Recent brain research suggests forcefully that people approach learning tasks in significantly different ways and that our teaching should take this into account." She says further that "neuropsychological diagnosis, a technical field still in its infancy, should be incorporated into independent schools' repertoire of tools for understanding individual learning patterns. Certain basic principles of brain structure and growth, fundamental to the life of the classroom, are not hard to understand." She suggests that independent schools exercise leadership by training teachers in this new field.

Anthony F. Gregorc, writer and consultant on "mind styles," explains that learning style consists of behaviors that give clues to the mind, qualities the individual uses to interact with the environment and to gather and process data from it. Mind qualities appear, to Gregorc, as dualities, such as abstract/concrete perception and inductive/deductive processing. All people have all these qualities, but they vary individually in strength and orientation. Learners need to understand their preferences and learn how to develop "unnatural" behaviors—adaptive, coping responses to their environment that are not as easy for them.

The natural corollary for learning styles is and must be teaching styles. Teaching style consists of the personal behaviors and approaches chosen to

deliver and foster rece[illegible] of information. It follows that more comfort results when teachers teach in ways that learners most easily learn. There is value in teachers pushing themselves to work in ways outside their personally preferred styles. Learners have long been required to accept teachers' styles as givens. Teachers have an equal obligation to understand their own actions and their students' varied styles.

Appendix B
BE BOLD

Too soon middle school educators are given an excuse that inhibits boldness and honesty: because many middle schools do not give grades, and because many place their students in upper school situations automatically, no "selling of their successes" is required.

Beginning in high school, students' actions, attitudes, personalities, and learning become relatively depersonalized and listed as grades and scores on a transcript. Students, parents, and, unfortunately, teachers become suddenly ruled by a piece of paper that sits in the front of each student's folder, travels with that student should he or she leave the school, and becomes the student to both the outside world and within the school. To a significantly different degree, terminal middle schools are caught by this same need to abbreviate and translate a person to paper. Fortunately for these schools, middle school grading is less respected and narrative supports more respected. "Real school" seems to start in high school, and so "real grades" that "count" squeeze out much that is creative, logical, and should be expected from schooling. Certain things must be done, must be taken simply because they are "required" either by the upper school itself or by the college world that awaits.

So, while the middle school has some control, it must deliver what has to be sensed as pure education. What is suggested as bold is most often simply sensible. What is proposed for the middle school to act upon is nothing uniquely age-appropriate. What is suggested is that the middle school concept is open enough to set an example so that more sensible, confident steps will be taken by others. There are many forces that seem to control educational strings—the school head, the board, the upper school, parents, colleges. Middle school educators hold some important strings, too. Middle school educators are at times seen as rebellious, free-spirited, innovative, confusing, and now, we hope, *bold*. A healthier world of education will come as the middle school uses some of its flexibility to do things that others must also do. Boldness fits very well.

If the middle school takes a bold lead in multicultural education and in nonsexist opportunities and attitudes, and if the middle school responds to the fuller range of intelligences, nothing should stop it from figuring out responses to other educational opportunities traditionally endorsed or ignored in school practice. The middle school philosophy by nature encourages this boldness. Bold beginnings in the middle school cannot help influencing other divisions of the school attached to the middle school.

Appendix C
WHAT IS A MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER?

Here are some of the words and phrases students, parents, colleagues, and others use to describe middle school teachers.

affectionate . . . adaptable...appreciative of energy and movement . . . able to summon up energy to get excited about a kid when feeling empty . . . awake to possibilities . . . awake to the niftiness of students . . . able to use variety of teaching techniques . . . appreciative of little things students say . . .

busy . . . bonded more closely to kids than subjects . . . backbone of the school . . .

clever . . . creative . . . crazy . . . communicator . . . comprehensive . . . caring . . . comforting . . . compassionate . . . consistent . . . committed . . . confused . . . courageous . . . concerned . . . candidate for superhuman . . .

dreamer . . . dedicated . . . devoted . . . downcast . . . dynamic . . . diverse . . .

encouraging . . . enthusiastic . . . elated . . . example . . . extravert . . . empathetic . . . educating for whole child . . . enjoys subject matter . . . enjoys and understands special needs of special age group . . . excited about kids even when feeling empty . . . experienced . . .

flexible . . . friendly . . . fun . . . friend . . . funny . . . firm . . . fair . . . frazzled . . . fulfilled . . . frustrated . . .

giver . . . gentle . . .

hardworking . . . harried . . . honest . . . humorous . . . happy to work with kids . . . handles tough age well . . . in high gear (too) often . . .

industrious . . . involved . . . imaginative . . .

juggler . . .

kind . . .

lively . . . loving . . . laughs at self . . .

multidimensional . . . multitalented . . . moral . . . mother-father-sister-brother-counselor-actor . . . mastery of subject field (so that time may be spent building self-esteem of students) . . .

nurturer . . . neat person . . .

organized . . . optimist . . . overworked . . . observant . . .

patient . . . positive . . . poor . . . professional . . . project-oriented . . .

quick-witted . . .

relaxed . . . Renaissance eclectic . . . right brained (probably) . . .

song-and-dance artist . . . sense of humor . . . sympathetic . . . silly at times . . . sharing . . . strict . . . special breed . . . sincere . . . sensitive . . .

talented . . . team player . . . teaches to where kids are . . . tired by February . . . taxed (by students' behavior) . . .

unflappable . . . underpaid . . . understanding . . . unrecognized . . . unique . . . unsung hero of education . . .

versatile . . .

witty . . . wonderful . . . with it . . . warm . . . wears many hats . . . worried . . .

zany (a little) . . .

Appendix D
PARENT PEER GROUPS

A school serves itself, its students, and the parents of its students best by making opportunities for parents to talk and be "normal" with other parents. Parent peer groups have become the answer to these needs in many schools.

Most schools organize parent peer groups around grade levels, with regular meetings set throughout the school year. The issues addressed are those that trouble parents at various points in their children's development as adolescents. These meetings are not supposed to generate proposals or directives, and discussions focus on general subjects, not personalities. Participating parents often marvel when they discover that they are normal, that they are not alone, and that some of what frustrates them is no more important than that—frustration.

The agenda for these meetings most often comes out of what parents need to discover for themselves. At the same time, certain patterns of topics discussed have surfaced over and over again through years of middle school parent peer group sessions. For example—

- Fifth graders' parents worry about "the beginnings of middle school," the influence of older students, and how satisfied they are with homework policies as the year goes on.

- Sixth graders' parents worry about boy-girl parties in the basement and playing spin the bottle.

- Seventh graders' parents worry most about social dynamics, the first possibilities of drinking, sex and drugs, and communication breakdowns with their children. Parties are even more scary.

- Eighth graders' parents, bracing for "the worst yet," sometimes find that social life has calmed down and shift their attention to upper school issues, pressures, hopes, and ambitions.

Appendix E
MIDDLE AND UPPER SCHOOL COOPERATION

During a recent pair of concurrent workshops for middle and upper school leaders, members of each group came up with wishes for the other group.

The middle school leaders had the following wishes to share with their colleagues in upper schools.

We wish . . .

- We could move past judging what each other does and be more understanding and trusting of the expertise each of us has about our age group.
- You would let us talk more about the developmental nature of young adolescents and we could share our philosophies with each other. (We do understand the pressures you experience regarding SAT's, AP's, and college placement.)
- We could both try to understand the realities behind these perceptions—

Middle school	*Upper school*
all nurture, coddling	all toughness, independence
all process	all content
all fun and games	all work and seriousness
all active	all passive
all group identity	all individual identity

- You would give us more feedback about our students as they progress through the upper school, including what additional information you would like to have about our students.
- We could share with each other the methods that work with individual students.
- We could work more equitably in determining the schedule and the shared use of personnel and facilities.
- We could explore together the things that change for ninth graders and recognize the reality of where each division is on these issues.

- We could work more collaboratively to make decisions about curriculum content and the sequence of skills.

- Department heads would spend a day shadowing a seventh grader.

- There could be more interdisciplinary work in upper schools that continues what is begun in middle school.

Upper school leaders came up with the following wishes for their middle school colleagues.

We wish . . .

- Middle school people could see the entire continuum of development, beyond the middle school.

- We had more communication among the faculties of different divisions, better exchange of information, and more mutual visitation of classes.

- You didn't teach some books and some concepts too early.

- We knew more about developmental stages and appreciated them.

- We had more mutual respect and shared responsibility.

- Middle school people realized that upper school people love kids too.

- We had better transitions and more meetings to make this work.

- Skills of middle school faculty members were shared with the upper school.

- We could have less hostility between us.

- We had more department heads from the middle school.

- We could have end-of-year meetings between middle and upper school teachers.

- Upper schools would look at middle school teachers in searches, not just at Ph.D.'s.

APPENDIX F
RESOURCES

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